

BRITISH NAVAL INTELLIGENCE AND BONAPARTE'S EGYPTIAN EXPEDITION OF 1798

By Michael Duffy

Amid the bi-centennial celebrations of the battle of the Nile it is as well to reflect that the post of commander of the Mediterranean fleet was the most demanding in the eighteenth-century Royal Navy. His force had to cover a theatre of operations 2,000 miles long, with two major naval bases (Toulon and Cadiz) to watch as well as a lesser one at Cartagena. An enemy who escaped him and got out into the Atlantic had an unlimited range of damaging options open to pursue, from attacking Britain's eastern or western empire (as in 1778 and 1805) to supporting the Brest fleet in a combined invasion in overwhelming numbers (1690, 1779, 1781). He was far removed from the Admiralty so that an exchange of correspondence took from two to three months and the most recent British news acquired by Nelson's squadron at the end of May 1798 was through extracts from the London press quoted in captured French newspapers. He was far removed from any dockyard – the nearest available drydock was at Plymouth and in 1798 the nearest watering and careening naval base was at Gibraltar. Whereas many command decisions for the Channel Fleet could be taken in close concert with the Admiralty, the Mediterranean commander had to take the entire burden on himself as well as a whole range of additional responsibilities. No other commander had to deal with so many foreign Powers as that in the Mediterranean. He was authorized to correspond with British envoys and consuls throughout the theatre. Often he had to take independent decisions on how to deal with international crises, far away from Admiralty or Foreign Office instructions: he could even set off a war without Cabinet authorization, as Nelson did in the aftermath of his victory at the Nile, when he encouraged Naples to attack the French. The flagship of the commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean was a combination of a floating Admiralty, Navy Board and Foreign Office.¹

The position was thus an onerous and exhausting office which burnt up commanders, damaging their health and their judgement. In 1798 the commander-in-chief was Admiral the Earl of St Vincent, temporarily based on the Tagus, who despatched Nelson back into the Mediterranean in command of a squadron to operate in those waters. St Vincent's two immediate predecessors, Lords Hood and Hotham, had gone home in something like disgrace, while a subordinate commander with a detached squadron at Gibraltar in 1796, Admiral Man, had a nervous breakdown and withdrew his ships to Britain when the outbreak of war with Spain confronted him with the vastly larger Spanish Cadiz fleet. When in ill-health himself in early 1798 St Vincent recommended that any successor 'should possess both temper and good nerves'.² St Vincent, the toughest of admirals, himself suffered something like a nervous breakdown in the following year, and the strain killed Collingwood a decade later.

The greatest support for 'temper and good nerves' was to have quick, accurate and detailed information which would enable a commander to make considered decisions. Yet this was one of the greatest problems which vastly increased the strain of the command. All this can be shown through examining the under-studied intelligence dimension of the launching of Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition from Toulon and the north-western Italian ports in 1798. It took place at a particularly difficult time to secure good information because the Spanish entry into the war had forced the British Mediterranean fleet to withdraw to operate from the Tagus at the end of 1796. In early 1798, therefore, the French dominated Mediterranean waters and starved the information flow from thence. Although he defeated the Spanish fleet in February 1797, in the battle which won him his title, St Vincent could only send occasional frigates on forays into the Mediterranean to collect such information as they could,³ while British envoys and consuls tried to send intelligence out to him via neutral ships or armed merchantmen to Gibraltar.⁴ However French warships and privateers ensured that little got out, and intelligence information from Italy, where Britain was able to maintain a diplomatic presence, had to be re-routed overland via Germany and Hamburg to London and sent thence to St Vincent's fleet blockading Cadiz. Hence news could be very stale when it reached him!

Moreover London had more immediate preoccupations in early 1798 with trouble in Ireland and the threat of French invasion. Bonaparte had been appointed commander of the French forces along the Channel coast and was assembling landing craft in the French seaports to invade either England or Ireland where there had already been one abortive French attempt at the end of 1796 and which was on the verge of rebellion. Bonaparte was seen by a British agent conducting a tour of inspection of the Channel ports in February 1798,⁵ but unknown to the British as a result of his tour Bonaparte advised the Directory to call off the invasion and proposed instead the alternatives of an attack on Hanover and Hamburg or on the Levant and India. On 5 March the Directory accepted the proposal for an invasion of Egypt to set up a French colony and threaten British preponderance in India, ordering the fleet to be prepared by 4 April and the expedition to be ready to sail by 9-19 April. The expedition, initially agreed at 24,600 infantry and 2,800 cavalry, was to be prepared at Toulon (where the main battlefleet was to be assembled), Marseilles, Genoa, Civitavecchia and Bastia, and on the 7th Bonaparte issued orders for preparations to be completed by 4-9 April.⁶

British attention was not drawn to the Mediterranean until the beginning of April when a request reached London from Vienna that a British fleet should be sent back into the western Mediterranean to protect Austria's Italian protégé Naples from threatened French attack.⁷ The Admiralty was consulted and clearly had not yet got wind of any large expedition preparing at Toulon when on the 6th it reported on the state of French forces in that theatre. The First Lord, Earl Spencer, wrote that the French had only nine line of battle ships in service in the Mediterranean, six at Corfu and three at Toulon, with two more preparing at that latter port. Such reports as had been received from Toulon indicated that the French had begun to prepare a small armament of five of the line in January, but that progress was slow because of scarcities in the arsenal and lack of sailors. A report had also been received on 25 March from the British Consul at Corfu that the French squadron there was about to return to Toulon with the captured

Venetian fleet (five battleships and three frigates). However he reported the latter to be in very bad condition and the French squadron badly equipped and manned, so that this news did not cause alarm, and nor did the report from a British frigate questioning neutrals coming out of Cadiz that talk at the main Spanish naval base was of the Toulon fleet being about to join them. The Admiralty was sure that the condition of the Toulon arsenal would not allow it to equip more than ten battleships for serious operations.⁸

It was only in the week after Spencer's 6 April review that reports at last began to reach London indicating that something rather larger was happening at Toulon. Copies of the Paris newspaper *L'Echo* from 26 March to 4 April were received on the 9th and contained a report that six battleships were now ready at Toulon with another arming rapidly.⁹ A correspondent in Paris relayed news from Genoa that General Berthier had arrived there, that he had demanded that all government vessels should be made ready for a very important expedition, and that work was starting rapidly to supply 20 ships.¹⁰ Probably the same correspondent despatched on 4 April news of the arrival of the Corfu force at Toulon, and *L'Echo* of 6-9 April carried news from Toulon of 27 March that nearly 500 sailors had been brought to that port and that 800 more were awaited from Bordeaux.¹¹ Clearly the French were making serious efforts to man a fleet at Toulon, while the information from Genoa about Berthier indicated that they were intending to take troops with them on Genoese transports.

In fact the lack of resources in the Mediterranean ports and the sudden eruption of a war scare with Austria led to Bonaparte's sailing date being put back from 20 April to 19 May. This was fortunate for watchers in London because it was not until about 24 April that the British government began to get direct accounts from its own agents in north-west Italy of what was taking place in that area. Piedmont, Genoa and Tuscany, though effectively under French military control, were officially neutral so that there were still British officials close enough to procure more detailed information. Ministers were particularly lucky that Earl St Vincent had sent a naval lieutenant, William Day, to Genoa to try to sell three Navy Board transports and release their crews left stranded at that port when he had hastily evacuated the Mediterranean at the end of 1796.¹² Day was thus on the spot to listen and to observe with a practised naval eye. His first report, sent overland and dated 31 March, was received about 24 April and told that 66 transports were fitting out at Genoa, shortly to be increased to 90, to receive a substantial body of troops under the command of General Baraguey d'Hilliers who would himself be under the command of Bonaparte. Day estimated from the state of preparations that the transports would not be ready to sail much before the beginning of May. He reported that their rendezvous with the French fleet was to be off Ajaccio in Corsica, and he stated the entire escorting battlefleet as likely to be 27 ships of the line, viz. six French battleships from Corfu, two at Corsica and five Venetian (but all of these badly equipped and manned), seven well-equipped French battleships from Toulon and also, according to rumour, seven Spanish battleships from Cartagena. Word was that the whole would proceed to Cadiz to break the British blockade of the main Spanish battlefleet at that port.¹³

From Turin the Secretary of Legation, Thomas Jackson, reported much the same. Orders had been given for 8,000 French troops to march to Genoa. The great size of the force together with the news that they were taking three months' provisions with

them seemed to indicate a more distant object of attack than Sardinia or Sicily which were both near and weakly defended. The reported size of the naval force being collected seemed to suggest that the expedition expected to meet the British fleet, which indicated a destination outside the Mediterranean, so that Jackson concluded that the expedition might well be destined for the Spanish coast to raise the blockade of Cadiz and then attack Portugal.¹⁴ However along with this report the Foreign Office sent the Admiralty another on 24 April 'on the accuracy of which the greatest reliance is placed'. This contained news from Madrid that it was surmised in Spain that the Toulon armament was to connect up with the Spanish forces at Cartagena and Cadiz to form a united fleet of 50 battleships and go to Brest to support an invasion of Britain.¹⁵

These new reports of the size of the force being assembled in the Mediterranean shook the Admiralty. Spencer told the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, on 26 April that 'The Toulon armament must surely be much exaggerated or all the accounts we have received hitherto from there must have been totally false'.¹⁶ Yet further accounts arriving in the next few days confirmed the size of the enterprise which was reported as preparing on the south coast of France and all over Italy and they indicated the preparation of a fleet of up to 17 line of battle ships and ten frigates.¹⁷

There was no doubt now that a vast expedition was preparing, and there was also some information of when it was due to depart. Day had believed that it could not be got ready before the beginning of May. Jackson at Turin reported on 4 April (received about 28th) that it was ordered to be ready by the 20th but that from its state it could not sail until late May.¹⁸

The problem remained as to where it was going, for reports of its destination oscillated wildly. The French Directory did its best to muddy the waters, taking quick action after leaks that it was destined for Egypt appeared in the Paris newspapers *Le Surveillant* and *Le Moniteur* on 1 April. On the same day it ordered that four 'ordinary journalists' should be informed that Bonaparte was ordered to Brest to command the army of England, and an article was inserted in *Le Moniteur* on 4 April to the same effect. The intention was presumably that this disinformation should reach British intelligence and it succeeded: on 9 April this announcement was recorded in the Admiralty files from a run of *L'Echo* from 26 March to 4 April.¹⁹ About a fortnight later, however, the same files recorded a report in a run of *Moniteurs* from 17 April, dated Toulon 6 April, that Bonaparte was expected at that port and that it was presumed that the expedition was destined for Naples and Sicily.²⁰

The Secretaries of State, to whom most foreign intelligence initially came, were as perplexed as the Admiralty. Besides passing on to Spencer the reports from Turin and Madrid described above, the Foreign Secretary recorded in his notebook journal:

April 24 - Accounts of the preparation said to be making for embarkation on board the Toulon ships. Supposed destination of these - Portugal - Naples - Egypt. The first is the more rational plan [Portugal was Britain's last remaining ally and vulnerable to attack].

April 26 - It appears that 61'78',71' believes the object to be Egypt incredible as it seems.

April 27 - 81 7 63 informs me that the destination of the Toulon fleet is for Barcelona to join the troops assembled at Perpignan and to march through Spain to Portugal. There is I fear but too much reason to think this intelligence true. Troops are also said to be marching towards Bayonne for the same object.²¹

At the same time the Secretary for War, Henry Dundas, sent the Admiralty an account received from an American lately come over from Le Havre that (a) there was a build-up of troops along the French Channel coast and a plan to attack the Channel Islands as the first step in an invasion programme; (b) emissaries had arrived from England and Ireland and one of the Irish leaders in exile, Napper Tandy, was preparing to accompany an invasion of Ireland (he did in fact sail with a small expedition in August); (c) conversations in Paris indicated a vast scheme of future French conquests – to revolutionize Sardinia and Naples, then to break with Prussia over Hamburg, then with Austria in order to revolutionize Poland; and (d) there was a 'strange scheme respecting Egypt' founded upon an agreement extorted from the Ottoman Porte to allow 400 French officers to pass through his lands to India to join the pro-French Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Mahrattas. As the least advantage of this plan it was hoped to remove from France Bonaparte and a large army for whose services the Directory could at that time find no further use.²²

This was not too inaccurate a picture of all the projects considered by the Directory in early 1798. Egypt was included in this report but it was mentioned as only the last of a long list. Moreover the intelligence was accompanied by a warning from Dundas to Spencer that the American was not in British pay and that 'I can give you nothing to enlighten you either as to the character of the informer or the means of information he is possessed of; and the only use such information can be of is by comparing it with other channels and thereby judging the probability'.²³ What most occupied Ministers about this report was probably what it said about invasion plans. Spencer was already becoming alarmed that the Brest fleet was arming faster than expected and would have 30 line of battle ships ready in two months' time. Counter-preparations were advanced for a commando raid, launched on 14 May, to bottle up invasion craft assembled at Ostend by destroying the canal exits there.²⁴ Egypt was rather remote from all this.

When, therefore, on 29 April Spencer ordered St Vincent to detach part of his fleet blockading Cadiz and send it into the Mediterranean in the hope of encouraging Austria to re-enter the war, he could only tell him that the obvious employment for such a force was to watch the Toulon armament at whose object Spencer could only guess. It was very probably in the first instance intended for Naples and this was alarming the Austrians, but it was 'in truth more likely to be destined either for Portugal or Ireland'.²⁵

Two days later news of the worsening relations between Austria and France led the Cabinet to send reinforcements to St Vincent so as to enable him to detach a larger force into the Mediterranean. By then Spencer had received further news which in one way limited the possibilities regarding the destination of the Toulon expedition and in another extended them. Day left Genoa on 13 April, his mission having collapsed when the French took control of the British transports there, and he made for London as fast as he could overland. Arriving on 1 May he indeed caught up with a letter he had sent from Genoa on 10 April announcing the French fleet as likely to be 14 line of battle ships according to a reported statement by Baraguey d'Hilliers. The Venetian battleships were not sound enough to take their place in the line and only a few would go cut down as frigates. Day reported in person to Spencer that he thought it impossible for the Genoese transports to be ready before 11-12 May and also that he did not

consider them seaworthy enough to stand a voyage beyond the relatively placid waters of the Mediterranean.²⁶

This last eyewitness news from an experienced officer convinced the Admiralty that the likely field of operations of the expedition was confined to the Mediterranean, but nevertheless that was still a vast theatre. Where could Bonaparte employ such a large armament in those waters? Spencer told St Vincent that 'it is therefore most probable that they are destined either for the coast of Spain or Naples, or (though I can scarce believe it) for the Levant'.²⁷

The Levant now came into more serious consideration because Day brought news that French transports were loading 4,000 very large ten-hooped barrels without bungholes at Leghorn, and the only object that could be conjectured for such an unlikely cargo was to attach them to the ships of the line so as to buoy these heavily-laden vessels over some shallows. This was held to indicate the Levant or more probably the Black Sea since Admiralty information was that large ships had to be lightened to pass the Dardenelles.²⁸ Even so, Spencer could 'scarce believe' that the Levant was Bonaparte's object and pointed to Spain or Naples as prior alternatives. When this information, along with the reinforcements, reached St Vincent, he passed it on together with 11 more line of battle ships to Nelson, whom he had already sent into the Mediterranean with three battleships to see what was going on at Toulon.

This was the last intelligence that reached Nelson from London before Bonaparte actually sailed from Toulon on 19-20 May. In London, however, Ministers formed a fairly good idea of the expedition's size and date of departure, and received more clues as to its destination before they heard that it had set sail.

Within a week of passing the above information to St Vincent, Ministers had copies of *L'Echo* of 27 April-1 May which carried a report of 19 April from Toulon that 24,000 men would embark on 20 May (Bonaparte had asked for 22,000-28,000 and embarked 38,000 including contingents from Italy and Corsica). Confirmation from Florence that the expedition would carry three months' provisions indicated a more distant object than Sardinia or Naples. Where then? Pointers to Egypt were now growing. From Germany came news gleaned from the letters of talkative French academics going on the expedition. M. de Dolemieu, mineralogist and Superintendant of Mines, wrote to a 'man of letters' in Germany who told another, M. de Luc, Professor of Natural History at Göttingen. De Luc also happened to be a member of Queen Charlotte's household and an agent of the Foreign Office and passed the news on. De Dolemieu wrote that books were being taken on board about journeys to the Levant, Egypt, Persia, India, Turkey, the Black and Caspian Seas, and Anarchsis's journey in Greece. Two Professors of Arabic, Persian and Turkish were going with them. De Dolemieu added that it was said that they were going to conquer Egypt, cut the Isthmus of Suez and seize Britain's commerce with India with 30,000 men under Bonaparte.²⁹

What historians have seized upon as the most accurate intelligence appreciation of French intentions was passed to the Admiralty by the Foreign Office on 24 May. Dated 16 April, it came from John Udney, the British Consul at Leghorn where he had compiled it with the help of a local British merchant, a Mr Jones, who had extensive commercial correspondence throughout the Mediterranean. Udney overestimated the force involved at 20 ships of the line and frigates, 600 transports and 50,000 men. His

account of its departure date as between 25 April and 10 May was between its actual initial and final sailing dates. Udney stated that between those dates it was to assemble at Ajaccio or Malta, which was to be surrendered to the French on their appearance, and that Alexandria was the principal destination, and even the Black Sea with the consent of the Porte. At all events the blow was intended against the East India Company's power in India, to reach which the troops might march overland to the Persian Gulf or go via the Red Sea.³⁰ Indirect support for such a possibility came from Jackson at Turin who reported on 14 April (recorded at the Admiralty about 28 May) that accounts from Barcelona and other Spanish ports made no mention of any military preparations nor expectation of the arrival of troops.³¹

However all this evidence pointing to the Levant and the Orient had to be set against other reports received about 28-30 May. The early Italian rumours that the armament was to join the Spanish fleet and pass into the Ocean kept resurfacing. They seemed confirmed by an insidious anonymous letter of 9 May from Rastadt, where the French were negotiating with Austria and the Princes of the Holy Roman Empire, that it had been noted from Paris that Egypt and India were only a mask to the real object, which was to join the Spanish at Cadiz and then attack first Portugal and then Britain.³²

It was this last intelligence that the Prime Minister, Pitt, and the Foreign Secretary chose to believe – perhaps because this was where the most immediate threat now lay after Ireland exploded into revolt in the later part of May. It was hard to resist the conviction that their enemy would not at once strike at this vital weakness. On 31 May Pitt wrote to his friend Lord Mornington, Governor General of India, not to warn him that Bonaparte was bound in his direction, but to announce that the 'Irish Jacobins' had risen and that France would probably try to invade Ireland from Toulon. Next day the Foreign Secretary wrote also that 'Bonaparte has at last embarked at Toulon with the project of attacking Ireland from thence, taking or not taking Portugal in his way according to circumstances. We have been beforehand with him and have reinforced St Vincent so secretly that (*mirabelu dictu*) it is at this hour not known here that we have done so'. Grenville looked forward to seeing Bonaparte arrive in Britain in a very different way from that which he intended.³³

Within a few days Ministers learned via the Paris newspapers that the Toulon armament had sailed on 19 May. Detailed accounts were provided of the composition of the force, variously reported as (1) 15 line of battle ships, 18 frigates and sloops, 300-400 transports, (2) 13 battleships, 6 frigates, 2 brigs, 8 ships armed *en flute*, 4 avisos, 4 bomb-vessels and 6 gunboats, and (3) (in *Le Moniteur*, 31 May) 13 battleships – one of 118, three of 80 and nine of 74 guns, seven 40-gun frigates, and 141 transports with 19,000 men from the French ports (Ministers could add at least 10,000 from Italy). The information could hardly have been more complete or accurate. The expedition consisted of 13 battleships of the categories stated by *Le Moniteur* (except that Admiral Brueys's flagship, *L'Orient*, was of 120 not 118 guns), six frigates, one corvette, two of the line and seven frigates armed *en flute*, eight brigs and avisos, four bomb-vessels and 14 gunboats, with 38,000 troops in some 280 transports.³⁴

French newspapers arriving subsequently also indicated the direction it was going. *L'Echo* of 3 June carried a report of the armament being seen on 22 May sailing

south-east, and on 5 June reported it being sighted on 23 May 60-80 leagues south-east of Toulon being carried along on constant north-west winds.³⁵

Despite the prejudices of Pitt and Grenville, and despite another red-herring from Hamburg that the force was destined for America and the West Indies, Henry Dundas, the Secretary for War and also President of the Board of Control for India, was now sure that the armament was on its way to Egypt and began to take precautions lest Nelson missed it.³⁶ Three new pieces of information arriving before 13 June seemed to clinch the matter. Firstly, from Frankfurt came an account of another conversation between two French academics, one of whom, Faujas de St Fond, was in the employ of the French government and who stated that the Toulon expedition was certainly sailing for Egypt, that it had been arranged with the Porte (untrue), that Bonaparte had 40,000 men (he had 38,000), and that after securing the ports of Egypt he would take the nearest route by Arabia through Persia and across the Indus to India.³⁷ Secondly, on 11 June came a report from the acting British envoy at Florence, dated 6 May, that the French general Cervoni, who was going with it, had declared the expedition destined for Alexandria whence the French army would attempt by land to reach Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore and main barrier to British preponderance over southern India.³⁸ And lastly, a report arrived from the Cape of a proclamation issued by the French Governor of the Mauritius on 30 January indicating that Tipu had asked for an alliance with France and calling for a contingent of French volunteers from that colony to serve with Tipu's army.³⁹

The incredible had now become credible and steps were hastily taken to reinforce India and to bar the mouth of the Red Sea in case Bonaparte managed to get to Egypt.⁴⁰ One of the biggest obstacles to the British government accepting the truth of the Egypt-India project had been the imaginative vastness of the enterprise. It had seemed both too magnificent and too far-fetched a conception to be a practical military operation. Spencer admitted that 'It had for some time been reported that the armament was destined for Egypt, but the plan seemed so chimerical and romantic that little credit was given to it'.⁴¹ Now, however, a chastened Foreign Secretary wrote to his brother on 13 June that:

It really looks as if Bonaparte was after all, in sober truth going to Egypt: and Dundas seems to think the scheme of attacking India from thence not so impractical as it may appear. I am still incredulous as to the latter point, though as to the former I am shaken. But as Bonaparte on the 23rd was still off Toulon and as Lord St Vincent must have detached on the 21st at latest, there is much reason to hope that Nelson may destroy all these visions, be they what they may.⁴²

Nelson had been ordered into the Mediterranean by St Vincent on 2 May with instructions to take a small force of three battleships, two frigates and a sloop off Toulon to reconnoitre and discover what he could of French intentions. He sailed into a distinctly unfavourable environment where he could expect no support and a benign neutrality only from the Italian states of Tuscany and Naples and the Arab rulers of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. Although he was closest to Toulon in fact the information he was able to gather on the spot was much less than that accruing to Ministers in far-off London. The small size of his reconnaissance squadron very much limited the radius of information he could gather, since he needed to keep it concentrated both for its own security in hostile waters and also in readiness to react to any move from Toulon. Shut

out by French troops from the coasts where the expedition was preparing, he had to glean his information from ships captured or interrogated at sea.

On 17 May he reported back to St Vincent that everything he had learned indicated that the expedition was preparing to sail. One of his frigates captured a 6-gun French corvette, *La Pierre*, which came out of Toulon the previous night and its 65 crew-members were interrogated separately. From their statements he learned that Bonaparte had arrived in Toulon the previous Friday, that 15 ships of the line were ready for sea but that only six were said to be sailing with the transports (was this deliberate disinformation to try to draw Nelson into a trap by misleading him into attacking Brueys's much stronger fleet?). About 12,000 men were embarked, cavalry had arrived at Toulon but Nelson could not learn whether it had also been embarked,⁴³ and no one knew whither the armament was destined. 'All this information is but little more than you knew when I left you' admitted Nelson to St Vincent, and privately he added that 'They order their matters so well in France, that all is secret'.⁴⁴

Then disaster struck. From 19-21 May Nelson's squadron was hit by a gale. His scouting ships, the frigates and sloop lost contact and never regained it,⁴⁵ and on 21 May Nelson's flagship lost its foremast and main and mizzen topmasts to the storm and had to be towed to the safety of a Sardinian port by the other two battleships. Refused help by the nervous Sardinian authorities, Nelson had to make his own repairs, which took time while temporary masts were rigged, and it was not until 27 May that he was ready to put to sea again. In the meantime the French had got out of Toulon. Sailing on the 19th the expedition ran down the coast to Genoa to pick up the contingent from that port and then stood across to Corsica. There it remained from 23-30 May waiting for the contingents from Ajaccio and Civitavecchia. The former joined on the 27th, but when the latter had still not arrived by the 30th Bonaparte and Brueys sailed slowly down the east coast of Sardinia, stood across to Sicily which they reached on 7 June, and on the 9th they approached their first objective, Malta. There they were at last joined by the 70 ships of the Civitavecchia contingent which had finally sailed on 28 May.⁴⁶

As Bonaparte passed down one side of Corsica and Sardinia, so Nelson's three battleships were beating back towards Toulon up the other. On 31 May he was back off Toulon and began casting about for where the French had gone. His two consorts performed valiantly in the place of cruisers, picking up a vessel from Marseilles on the 28th from which they learned of Bonaparte's departure and from which they also secured copies of several Paris papers dated up to 16 May.⁴⁷ While still in the vicinity of Toulon Nelson was found by a brig from St Vincent with news that 11 more ships of the line were coming to join him and so he held up his pursuit until their arrival. On 7 June his consorts captured two vessels from Genoa,⁴⁸ and these and the Marseilles ship provided all the extra information that Nelson had to go on when his reinforcements arrived that same evening. He then had the misfortune to be becalmed and it was not until the 12th that he was able to round Cape Corse and begin his pursuit. His search was plagued by inaccurate information. He heard that the Genoa force had not all been embarked on the 2nd and so he assumed that the armament was still quite close. He therefore started by searching all the likely rendezvous bays down the coast between Corsica and Italy. It was not until 14 June off Civitavecchia that he spoke to a Tunisian cruiser which told him that on the 10th it had spoken to a Greek which had

passed through the French fleet on the 4th steering eastward off the north-west coast of Sicily. Fearing that the Kingdom of Naples was therefore the French objective Nelson hurried southwards.⁴⁹

Nelson reached Naples on 17 June but found the Neapolitan capital secure. Naples was not the French target, but the Neapolitans told him that the French fleet had been reported off Malta on the 8th about to attack it. As he passed through the Straits of Messina on the 20th he was informed by the British Consul at Messina that Malta had surrendered on the 15th. Pressing on his scouting brig intercepted a Genoese merchant brig off Cape Passaro on the 22nd. The Genoese vessel declared that it had left Malta the previous day, that Malta had surrendered on the 15th, and that the French fleet had left on the 16th – it was supposed for Sicily.

Again the wind intervened, blowing strongly from WNW, and since Nelson could not get on to Malta until it moderated he took stock of the situation from the information he had now collected. It is uncertain that Nelson ever received Udney's report of 16 April (see above) which Spencer despatched on to St Vincent on its receipt on 24 May, but there is in the Nelson Papers a copy of a letter from Udney of 26 April, which he may have received as his squadron looked into Leghorn on its way southward. This now reported the French at 40,000 men on at least 400 vessels. Despite a disinformation campaign from Genoa by Mons. Belville, former French Consul at Leghorn, Udney had pretty well-founded intelligence that their first attempt would be on Malta and from there to invade Sicily, to secure that granary, and then Naples, in all of which their emissaries had secured a strong party. He was far less certain of what they would then do with such an immense force, but reflecting on the former plan of Catherine the Great of Russia to get possession of Egypt, he was convinced that in his unbounded enterprises, Bonaparte would with more reason at some time hereafter pursue the same scheme and seize and fortify Alexandria, Cairo and Suez. Udney thought that if the French intended uniting with Tipu Sultan against Britain's possessions in India, the danger of losing half their army in crossing the desert would be no obstacle.⁵⁰

Nelson now knew the French had seized Malta. However he also knew from what the Neapolitans told him that they were at peace with France and that Bonaparte had sent ashore to Sicily that the King need not be alarmed since Sicily was not his object. The Neapolitan administration in Sicily also appeared not to be alarmed otherwise it would have sent for Nelson as he passed down the coast. He added up what he now knew of the French strength – 40,000 troops in 280 transports, with much artillery, waggons, draught-horses, cavalry, artificers, naturalists, astronomers, mathematicians etc. He now knew that their rendezvous in case of separation had been first Bastia then Malta – going eastward. All this he had picked up in his search so far. The French strength was too great to be designed simply to attack Malta, yet Naples thought itself safe and the westerly winds at that season made it almost impossible to get back against the wind to Spain, particularly with such a large and unwieldy armada. Consequently he concluded that they must be intending to go on eastward, and in these circumstances he suspected that they were indeed heading for Egypt whence they might get to the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean to attack British India – the only British possession that could be attacked by going in that direction.⁵¹

The appreciation was exactly right. Unfortunately one small piece of inaccurate intelligence ruined the devastating use that might have been made of it to catch Bonaparte at sea en route for Alexandria. The French had in fact left Malta on the 19th, three days later than the Genoese brig had told Nelson's scout. Whether the misinformation was deliberate or accidental or whether Nelson's scouting brig had simply misheard what the Genoese crew had said, the difference in dates was crucial. Nelson rejected going on to Malta and instead pressed on eastward expecting the French to be three days further ahead of him than they actually were. Three French frigates, which might have led Nelson to the French convoy, were seen on the morning of the 22nd, but were not considered of sufficient importance to risk separating the squadron in chasing them. Consequently he actually overtook the French fleet off Crete on 25-26 June without seeing it and passed on before he began to look in earnest around the point where he expected to catch up with them.⁵² For a brief moment the destiny of Napoleon Bonaparte, and indeed of Europe, had been in the hands, or rather the words, of the master of a Genoese brig. Had Nelson caught the armament at sea there could have been little contest between his crack squadron and Brueys's battleships, overcrowded with troops and with their gundecks obstructed by Bonaparte's artillery train which, against naval wishes, he had insisted on embarking on the warships. At the subsequent battle of the Nile Brueys lost his life when his flagship *L'Orient* blew up. How much different might history have been had that happened while Bonaparte was on board? But Nelson was now chasing an enemy who was in fact behind him, and when he got to Alexandria first and found they were not there he was in agony that he had made the wrong appreciation. He dashed off at once north to Asia Minor lest the French had gone there – the French in fact arrived at Alexandria two days after he left it. Not finding them on the Anatolian coast he beat back again, mortified, to Sicily to reprovision and begin collecting information again. On 23 July he left Syracuse and at last, on the 28th, off the Morea, he received two pieces of intelligence that the French had been seen steering south-east from Crete four weeks before. They had gone to Egypt after all! However, by the time he got back to Alexandria again on 1 August Bonaparte had disembarked his troops and all but conquered Egypt. There remained accessible only Brueys's battlefleet sheltering in Aboukir Bay and this Nelson's ships annihilated that same night.⁵³

In the end those responsible for interpreting intelligence got it right. Already Dundas had taken steps to send a naval force to shut the entrance to the Red Sea and to warn the Governor General of India, while Nelson at last caught the French fleet and destroyed it. But there was very little certainty in the information at hand; much was inspired guesswork and gut instinct, and it all could have been wrong! Nelson could have been 2,000 miles out if the Toulon force had gone the other way (and he did indeed get it wrong in early 1805 by going eastward each time during Villeneuve's two attempts to escape from Toulon for the West Indies).⁵⁴ The strain on the nerves was immense. As Nelson's squadron chased towards Egypt for the first time in June, his senior captain wrote:

some days must now elapse before we can be relieved from our cruel suspense; and if, at the end of our journey, we find we are upon a wrong scent, our embarrassment will be great indeed. Fortunately, I only act here en second; but did the chief responsibility rest with me, I fear it would be more than my too irritable nerves would bear.⁵⁵

References

- 1 For a full exposition of the manifold tasks of the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean station see P. Mackesy, *The War for the Mediterranean 1803-1810* (London, 1957).
- 2 J.S. Corbeau (ed.), *Private papers of George, second Earl Spencer*, Vol. 2 (Navy Record Society, Vol. XLVIII, 1914), II, 442-3.
- 3 Public Record Office, Admiralty Papers, Adm. 1/390, St Vincent to Nepean 8 Feb. 1798, enclosing report from Captain Thompson, 20 Jan.
- 4 *Ibid.* St Vincent to Nepean 10 May 1798, enclosing letter from Consul Udney at Leghorn, 10 March.
- 5 Marquess of Londonderry (ed.), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, Vol. I (London, 1848), 165.
- 6 C. de la Jonquière, *L'Expédition d'Égypt 1798-1801*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1899), 171-208. The more recent origins of the Egyptian project are discussed in Talleyrand's memorandum of 14 Feb. 1797 (*ibid.*, 154-68) and in A.B. Rodger, *The War of the Second Coalition 1798 to 1801* (Oxford, 1964), 15-26. For a modern survey of the expedition, with a full bibliography, see H.L. Laurens, *L'Expédition d'Égypte 1798-1801* (Paris, 1989); and for a discussion of the preparations see C. Buchet, 'Les préparatifs de l'expédition d'Égypte' in *Français et Anglais en Méditerranée* (Service historique de la Marine, Vincennes, 1992), 55-68.
- 7 On 28 January the Directory ordered a small armament of five line of battle ships to be prepared at Toulon in order to intimidate Naples and bring it under French influence (Adm. 1/6033, reports of the state of Toulon, 321, 332, 334, 343-5).
- 8 *Spencer Papers*, II, 437; Public Record Office, Admiralty Papers, Adm. 1/6033, 232; extract of letter from Toulon 13 Feb. in the London newspaper *The Oracle* 6 March, 334, 343-5; extracts of letters from Genoa 27 Jan., 10 Feb., 345-6; extract from Consul Brame, Genoa, 13 Feb. (received 23 March 1798).
- 9 Adm. 1/6034, 3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 6, 8.
- 12 PRO Adm. 1/393 Consul Udney to St Vincent 10 March 1798, enclosed in St Vincent to Nepean 10 May.
- 13 Adm. 1/6034, 14.
- 14 Adm. 1/4146 Canning to Nepean 24 April, enclosing extract of Jackson's dispatch of 31 March 1798.
- 15 *Ibid.*, Hammond to Nepean 24 April 1798.
- 16 Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Manuscripts of J.B. Fortescue Esq. preserved at Dropmore*, Vol. IV (London, 1905), 178.
- 17 Adm. 1/6034, p.16: *Le Moniteur* 13 to - April; Adm. 1/4176: extract of Jackson to Grenville 4 April 1798.
- 18 *Idem.*
- 19 Jonquière, *Expédition d'Égypt*, 252-3 n. 1, 253-4; Adm. 1/6034, 4, 6.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 21 BL Add. MSS 69, 118, Lord Grenville notebook journal April 1798, 34-5.
- 22 *Spencer Papers*, II, 324-5: Memorandum of intelligence 26 April 1798.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 325-6: Dundas to Spencer 27 April 1798.
- 24 HMC, *Dropmore MSS*, IV, 178; W. James, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, Vol. II (London, 1837), 117.
- 25 *Spencer Papers*, II, 438-9.
- 26 BL, Althorpe Papers G 202, Day to Spencer 31 March 1798; PRO Adm. 1/6034, 23-4; *Spencer Papers*, II, 445, Spencer to St Vincent 1 May 1798.
- 27 *Spencer Papers*, II, 445.
- 28 HMC, *Dropmore MSS*, IV, 185, Spencer to Grenville 4 May 1798.
- 29 Adm. 1/6034, 26; HMC, *Dropmore MSS*, IV, 193, de Luc to Grenville 7 May, enclosing extracts of de Dolemieu's letters of 28 March and 11 April 1798.
- 30 Adm. 1/4176 Canning to Nepean 34 May, enclosing extract from Udney of 16 April. The letter is endorsed by Spencer 'Copy to be sent to Lord St Vincent'. Rodger's claim (*War of the Second Coalition*, 37) that Grenville and the Foreign Office failed to pass this information on to Pitt and Dundas or to Spencer at the Admiralty is thus demonstrably wrong.
- 31 Adm. 1/6034, 38.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 38; Adm. 1/4176: Hammond to Nepean 30 May 1798, with enclosure.
- 33 P. Mackesy, *Statesmen at War. The Strategy of Overthrow 1798-1799* (London, 1974), 24; HMC, *Dropmore MSS*, IV, 229-30; BL Add.

MSS 70, 927, Grenville to Mornington 1 June 1798.

34 Adm. 1/6034, 41, 44; Jonquière, *Expédition d'Égypte*, I, 510-24.

35 Adm. 1/6034, 44.

36 Adm. 1/4176 extract of dispatch from Crawford, Hamburg 29 May; *Spencer Papers*, II, 448-50; R.B. Martin (ed.), *Despatches, Minutes and Correspondence of the Marquess Wellesley* (London, 1836), I, 668-92, Dundas to Grenville 13 June 1798.

37 *Ibid*, 692, Secret intelligence from Frankfurt.

38 Adm. 1/4176, Canning to Nepean, 11 June, enclosing B. Turner's letter to Lord Grenville from Florence, 6 May 1798.

39 E. Ingram (ed.), *Two Views of British India. The Private Correspondence of Mr Dundas and Lord Wellesley: 1798-1801* (Bath, 1970), 46-7: Dundas to Mornington 16 June 1798, see also 52-4; Richmond (ed.), *Spencer Papers*, IV (Navy Records Society Vol. LIX, 1924), 153-4, 171-2.

40 Ingram, *Two Views of British India*, 48; *Spencer Papers*, IV, 172-8.

41 *Spencer Papers*, IV, 171-2: Spencer to Christian, 19 June 1798.

42 Duke of Buckingham and Chandos (ed.), *Memoirs of the Courts and Cabinets of George III*, Vol. II (London, 1853), 400-1.

43 Next day he reported to St Vincent that by the account of one of his captains, Saumarez, the cavalry had been embarked. (N.H. Nicholas [ed.], *The Despatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, Vol. III [London, 1845], 17).

44 *Nelson Dispatches*, III, 15-7.

45 See M.K. Barritt, 'Nelson's frigates - May to August 1798', *M.M.*, LVIII (1972), 281-95.

46 James, *Naval History*, II, 150.

47 Sir John Ross (ed.), *Memoirs and correspondence of Admiral Lord de Saumarez*, 2 vols (London, 1838), I, 198.

48 *Ibid*, 199, 201.

49 *Nelson Dispatches*, III, 27-30, Nelson to St Vincent, 11, 12-15 June 1798.

50 BL Add. MSS 34, 906ff, 398-v. In this letter Udney declared that he had written on several occasions and tried to get his letters out via Gibraltar, but that Leghorn was so blockaded by French and Corsican privateers that neutral vessels had been frightened off. He added that he was forwarding this copy by way of England, but it is unclear if this is how Nelson received it (it would have arrived too late) or whether Udney sent out to him a duplicate as he passed down the coast in pursuit of Brueys's convoy.

51 *Nelson Dispatches*, III, 38-41, Nelson to St Vincent, 29 June 1798. He was already thinking on these lines even before he passed Naples. See *Memoirs and correspondence of Saumarez*, I, 202-3 (15 June 1798).

52 Rodger, *War of the Second Coalition*, 51-3. The French effectively shut off any further information from reaching him by sinking all shipping they encountered in their path so as to stop them spreading the news. Nelson only met with three ships between Sicily and Alexandria and they had nothing to tell him (James, *Naval History*, II, 154-5).

53 James, *Naval History*, III, 155, 157; *Nelson Dispatches*, III, 37-48.

54 Nicholas, *Dispatches and letters of Nelson*, VI, 320, 325-43, 393-408.

55 *Memoirs and correspondence of Saumarez*, I, 336.

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